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ABSTRACT

Due to differences in the grammars of English and French, "pendant" and "depuis" are as difficult to master for English speakers as their equivalents "for" and "since" are for French speakers. To the former, three facts are crucial: (1) "depuis" corresponds to both "for" and "since," which creates ambiguities; (2) "depuis" applies to an uncompleted process, while "pendant" assumes completeness; and accordingly, (3) different verb tenses are used for "depuis" and "pendant." However, one French tense typically used for a completed process, the passe compose, looks like a literal translation of an English tense specialized in incompleteness, the present perfect. Native-language interference is likely to linger in this case, so for the teaching of this specific situation, recourse to contrastive methods seems necessary. This is a topic that the grammar-translation method was better prepared to teach than are more modern methods. (Author/MSE)

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# The Learning of PENDANT and DEPUIS

## by English Speakers : A Contrastive Analysis.

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# The Learning of PENDANT and DEPUIS by English Speakers , A Contrastive Analysis;

## A B S T R A C T

Due to differences in the grammars of their native languages, PENDANT and DEPUIS are as difficult to master for English speakers as their equivalents FOR and SINCE are for French speakers. To the former, three problems are crucial.

-- DEPUIS corresponds both to FOR and SINCE, which creates ambiguities.

-- DEPUIS applies to an uncompleted process, while PENDANT assumes completeness.

-- Accordingly, different tenses are used for DEPUIS and PENDANT. But, one French tense typically used for a completed process (Passé Composé) looks like a literal translation of an English tense specialized in uncompleteness (present perfect)!

For the teaching of this particular problem, recourse to translation seems unescapable. It could be a topic which Grammar-Translation was better prepared to teach than more modern methods.

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# The Learning of PENDANT and DEPUIS

# by English Speakers: A Contrastive Analysis.

As a teacher of English in France, I can remember the ominous place taken by the study of FOR, SINCE, AGO and the accompanying casuistry of Tense use. Little did I suspect that, as a teacher of French at a University of an English-speaking country, I would experience an equally critical situation with the teaching of IL Y A, DEPUIS, PENDANT because, while the logistics of your native language is accepted as an act of God, the different criteria of another language system are often considered as an unusually perverse hardship, and this still aggravated by the lesser preparation of American students to grammatical reasoning. Even among Americans who are reasonably fluent in French, one can hear,"J'ai travaillé à cette Université pendant 15 ans". This sentence may be literally accepted until one notices that the speaker is much too young to have "put in" 15 years, plus an interval, plus some second "stretch", because, after all, he is known to be thus affiliated now. This article will try to prove that this mistaken statement can be blamed on three grammatical problems: one about the difference of criteria between the French and English Time Prepositions, one on the semantic opposition of two French Prepositions and one on the divergent views placed upon some Tenses by French and English speakers. The article will eventually suggest some way to train our students to avoid the fate of this unfortunate perpetrator and correctly say, "Je travaille ici depuis 15 ans".

PROBLEM I DEPUIS = FOR or SINCE.

The first puzzle for the English speakers is one of possible ambiguity. How can the French language, whose great flexibility is being constantly drummed into their heads, allow such disreputable laxity?

1/ Elle fait la queue depuis deux heures

may mean:

1'/ She has been waiting in line for two hours

or

1"/ She has been waiting in line since two o'clock

The much-renowned French motto of "un mot pour chaque chose et chaque chose à sa place" does not seem to worry that the double-entendre of HEURE as "hour" and "time", and the cumulative uses of DEPUIS come to roost upon the same example. In English, even the lax military parlance of "two hundred hours" saves the difference of "for" and "since".

| English | Prepositional Phrase | French | |
|---|---|---|---|
| SINCE | Time of Beginning | à partir de | DEPUIS |
| FOR | Duration | il y a ... que<br>voila ... que<br>cela fait ... que | DEPUIS |
| | | PENDANT | |

Fig.1 Distribution of Time Prepositions in English/French.

This accusation is not entirely unjustified, while it is not quite so damning as it seems. If DEPUIS is accompanied by "words indicating the exact or approximate duration of the action, up to the present moment" (Brichant, p. 84), it can be replaced with equivalents, give or take some emotional nuances:

1a/ Il y a deux heures qu'elle fait la queue

1b/ Voilà deux heures qu'elle fait la queue

1c/ Cela fait deux heures qu'elle fait la queue

There is thus a way to make this semantic difference explicit in French, using constructions that equate "for" only. But it remains that the language has no word meaning only "since" (except, in a future context, " à partir de") and that DEPUIS will, in some cases, remain obscure, unless the speaker wishes to (or can) make it specific.

There is then an obvious unbalance between "the chronological beginning of the action"(Brichant, p. 83) and the other meaning, still increased by the existence of another equivalent to "for", entirely different from DEPUIS.

## PROBLEM II Semantic Opposition DEPUIS/PENDANT

Even if we agree to defuse the possible "initial" meaning of DEPUIS by appending a typically "durative" expression to it, there is still the problem of showing the difference between:

2/ Il dort depuis une semaine

3/ Il dort pendant une semaine

We will show our desire to concentrate upon qualitative oppositions by considering only PENDANT as a challenger and choosing not to follow

Le Bon Usage in its punctilious claim that " . . . durant [. . .] implique une idée de durée, tandis que pendant [. . .] indique un moment, une portion limitée de temps"(Grevisse, p. 945). Instead, we will concede that "durant" belongs to the written and PENDANT to the general register (cf. Wagner & Pinchon, p. 480)

To come back to this opposition DEPUIS/PENDANT (always assuming that we only consider them as equivalents of "for"), we will concentrate on their temporal references. DEPUIS describes a duration limited only by the present moment (cf. ex. 4) or another point of reference (cf. ex. 5):

4/ Nous vivons ici depuis la rentrée scolaire

5/ Monique lisait Molière depuis deux jours quand je lui ai raconté ce film

In many cases, one can assume that this situation will resume after this purely theoretical "interruption". It could be helpful to represent the message of DEPUIS by this ideogram, which shows that the operation is not completed at the time considered:

PENDANT, on the other hand (and "durant", but we already have dismissed the study of this minor variance), "sont des prépositions servant à construire un complément qui évoque le laps de temps couvert par le déroulement de tout un procès [italics mine]" (Wagner & Pinchon, p. 480).

6/ Je fais de la gymnastique pendant une heure chaque matin

In this example, nothing assumes any interruption of the operation and nothing indicates at what time it takes place, beyond the vague notation of "matin". The only incontroversible information is that the gymnastics function is completed. It would then be clear to represent the use of PENDANT with this figure:

PROBLEM III DEPUIS/PENDANT Connections with Tenses.

The data associated so far with Time Prepositions may evoke some similar qualities inherent to different Tenses of the verb conjugation. Some combinations would be absolutely contradictory. We have already decided that DEPUIS assumed a character of "uncompleteness" and PENDANT of "completeness". Let us now consider the elements associated with French Tenses:

"Le passé composé marque l'aspect de l'accompli, l'évènement qu'il traduit est entièrement achevé [my italics] "(Chevalier, p. 339).

"L'imparfait [. . .] est apte à traduire l'action non achevée [my italics] " (Chevalier, p. 341).

"L'action dont la durée est mesurée en unités de temps ne peut se rendre par l'imparfait"(Darbelnet, p. 126). This implies that PENDANT cannot be connected with imparfait, neither can it be with présent, "apte à traduire les nuances de l'aspect non accompli"(Chevalier, p. 336). It also implies that DEPUIS is especially suitable for these tenses, while it appears quite incompatible with passé composé.

7/ *Vous travaillez pendant deux semaines

8/ ?Il a fait une composition depuis midi

Two important reservations should be made concerning the uses of these tenses.

The first one concerns the use of présent and imparfait for customary actions. In that case, each action may be completed while the habit it constitutes remains uncmpleted, which qualifies the sentence for the otherwise inappropriate tenses. Ex. 7 should be qualified in the following manner:

7a/ Vous travaillez pendant deux semaines chaque été

The second remark concerns the use of passé composé for "un fait passé qui se situe à l'intérieur d'une période qui n'est pas achevée"(Darbelnet, p. 117). What counts is that the action is done with and the uncompleteness of the loose period is marked by the use of DEPUIS. It still is an unusual statement: coming from an English speaker, it might be suspected of meaning,

8'/ He has been making a composition since noon

and should probably be corrected as,

8a/ Il fait une composition depuis midi

This calls for some comment on one important difference between the French and English Tense systems. "Entre le passé et le présent, il existe une zone de transition dont l'anglais rend mieux compte que le français, grâce à son present perfect" (Darbelnet, p. 118).

When the speaker alludes to the period since an initial time (or for a certain duration), we must consider the action as continuing until (and including) the present moment. English speakers judge that this situation, mostly in the past as it is, should be covered by a tense of the past. Unfortunately, present perfect (and this may be blamed for much of the problem!) is literally, but not functionally, equivalent to French passé composé. French speakers, on the other hand, concentrate on the present part of this time, and, since French présent is " constitué du passé qui vient de s'écouler et du futur qui s'annonce"(Chevalier, p. 336), it is used,and very rightly,since it has a character of uncompleteness. For the same reason, imparfait will be used for durations interrupted by an action in the past.

9/ Molière jouait le Malade Imaginaire depuis une heure quand il est mort

This can explain why PENDANT is accompanied by tenses not very different from English use, while DEPUIS has a quite special treatment.

| | Futur | Présent | Imparfait | Passé Composé |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PENDANT | | * | * | |
| DEPUIS | + | | | = |

Fig. 2 Connections Prepositions/Tenses in French

Exceptions:

* case of customary présents or imparfaits, cf. ex. 7a

= case of completed actions within an uncompleted period.

10/ La musique a changé depuis mon enfance

+ (only for a duration)

11/ En l'an 3000, nous serons morts depuis longtemps!

## TEACHING THESE STRUCTURES

French grammars are very useful to ferret out the motivations behind this kind of problem, but they very seldom advise about good ways to teach these structures, because this is not the kind of question that worries a native. Le Bon Usage, for instance, rich as it is about many uncommon expressions, lists examples for DEPUIS followed by an infinitive, a clause or a location, but not a time, although this is by far the most usual case in modern French! Works prepared for foreign learners are more usable in that respect. This is probably a case when the modern tradition of avoiding use of the native language

may not be the best policy. DEPUIS and PENDANT can indeed be taught and understood in French only, but the real test of mastery will often be an effective translation, a very realistic kind of task for a language student and an exercise in which the pull of the native language may be too strong for resistance without previous immunization.

That is why I would especially recommand such American books as Pensée et Structure, written by a native used to teach English speakers, and its accompanying Cahier d'Exercices for training in this domain. The following course of exercises does not entirely originate there, but it emulates the spirit of this work.

In order to solve the first problem, concerning the "for" and "since" ambiguity of DEPUIS, we should assign the kind of exercise in which the verb is supplied and only the prepositional phrase has to be added:

"Instructions: Faire des phrases 1/ avec la durée en unités de temps
2/ avec la durée à partir d'un moment,

| Actions | Durée 1 | Durée 2 |
|---|---|---|
| J'apprends la sténo | quinze jours | 1776 |
| Les E. U. existent | deux semaines | l'été |
| Il est en voyage | | |
| Tu es souffrante | | |

Answers:

J'apprends la sténo depuis quinze jours.
Les E. U. existent depuis 1776.
Il est en voyage depuis deux semaines.
Tu es souffrante depuis l'été." (after Darbelnet, Cahier d'Exercices, p. 57)

For the opposition PENDANT/DEPUIS, it is important to train and test the learner's understanding of the "completeness" criterion of the situation. We could use this type of exercise:

"Nous sommes arrivés à Genève le 2 et nous sommes repartis le 17. Nous pouvons dire le 17:

-- Nous sommes à Genève _____ jours.

Plus tard, nous pouvons dire:

-- Nous sommes restés à Genève _____ jours."

(after Darbelnet, Cahier d'Exercices, p. 59)

Eventually, for the connection Prepositions/Tenses, and also to test the mastery of the whole topic, we can assign translations into French, such as:

"Traduisez:

-- She has lived in Venice for three years.

-- I lived in London for six months.

-- He has not read my letters since Christmas.

-- You had been working since October when the publisher called you.

In conclusion, even though this is one of the cases in which native-language influence will linger for long and "pop up" again when it is assumed to be powerless, we think that this chapter of syntax can be mastered. But, it is also our strong conviction that the case is very resistant to monolingual training and that some contrastive strategy is advised here: competence must help simple performance. This is one of the few points where Habit-formation language books may not teach as well as traditional Grammar-Translation works. It is an opportunity to keep what was desirable in former methods and associate it to more modern approaches.

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